

NINA KELSEY — 2021.08.20

RELIGION & CLIMATE CHANGE

A **VERY** TENTATIVE ROUND-UP

WHY RELIGION AND CLIMATE CHANGE?

- Climate change is a fundamental existential threat we **should** care about
- Religion is a powerful force shaping culture, beliefs, priorities and behaviors
- Religious leaders have a lot of power to push policy narratives; organizations are often large and well-funded
- Many religious traditions have theological narratives that can be adapted to climate conservation goals (e.g. *stewardship* in Christianity; connection to Islamic principles such as *Khalifa* or *Maslahah*)

HULME 2017

CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RELIGION

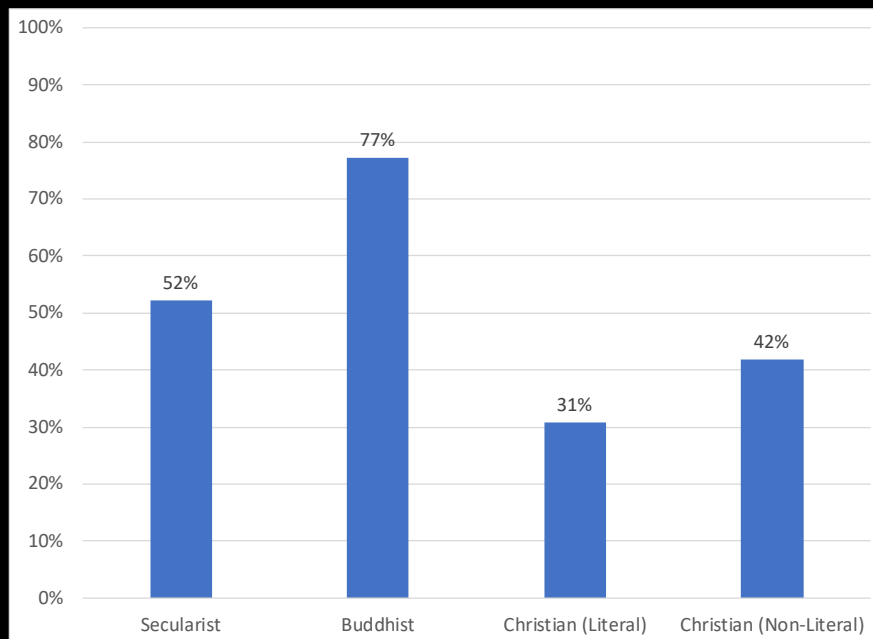
"...religious narratives and rituals shape the nature and credibility of different knowledge claims about climate—what is happening to the climate and why—as well as shaping individual and communal ethical and social behaviour.

Religious faith traditions and communities therefore offer "thick" accounts of moral reasoning for acting in the world, in response to climate change as much as in response to other social and ecological challenges. ... Such accounts of moral reasoning **sit in contrast to most secular calls for climate mitigation and adaptation, which rely upon "thin" global values:** criteria that may be widely acknowledged intellectually, but which lack conviction and are rootless and culturally non-specific..."

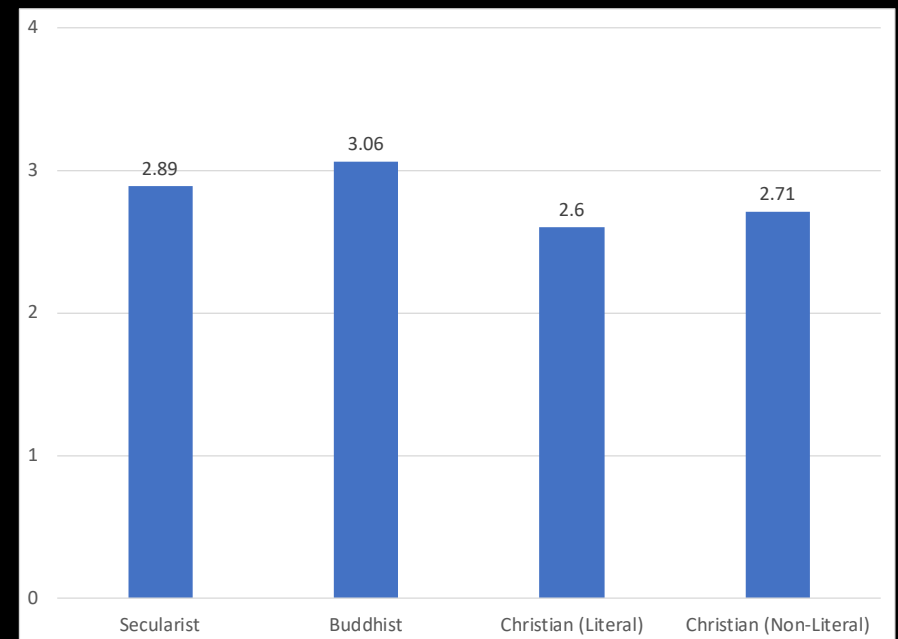
MORRISON ET AL 2015

RELIGION DOES MATTER FOR CLIMATE CHANGE ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOR

Belief that climate change is mostly man-made:



How much effort should Australia make to reduce global warming? (1 = none; 4 = a lot)



PUBLIC RELIGION RESEARCH INSTITUTE



RESEARCH

SPOTLIGHT

ABOUT

THE NEWSROOM

DATA VAULT

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Research
Overview



Abortion & Reproductive Health



LGBTQ



Climate Change & Science



Politics & Elections



Economy



Race & Ethnicity



Immigration



Religion & Culture



Law & Criminal Justice



Sports

Americans rank climate change last on a list of important issues. Only five percent of Americans say climate change is the most important issue facing the U.S. today. The issue of climate change ranks behind the lack of jobs (22%), the increasing gap between rich and poor (18%), health care (17%), the budget deficit (13%), immigration reform (10%), and the rising cost of education (9%).

BELIEVERS, SYMPATHIZERS, AND SKEPTICS: WHY AMERICANS ARE CONFLICTED
ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE, ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY, AND SCIENCE

<https://www.pri.org/research/believers-sympathizers-skeptics-americans-conflicted-climate-change-environmental-policy-science/>

39% of Americans believe that God would **not allow** humans to destroy the earth; 53% disagree.

57% of Americans say God gave humans the task of **living responsibly** with animals, plants, and other resources, which are not just for human benefit.

35% of Americans believe that God gave human beings the **right to use** animals, plants, and all other resources of the planet solely for their own benefit.

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Of Americans who report spiritual experiences **very frequently**

- 35% are very concerned about climate change
- 20% are somewhat concerned about climate change

55%

Of Americans who report **very infrequent** spiritual experiences

- 21% are very concerned about climate change
- 20% are somewhat concerned about climate change

41%

No significant relationship between frequency of spiritual experiences and beliefs about the reality/causes of climate change.

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WHITE EVANGELICAL PROTESTANTS

More likely than any other religious group to be climate change Skeptics.

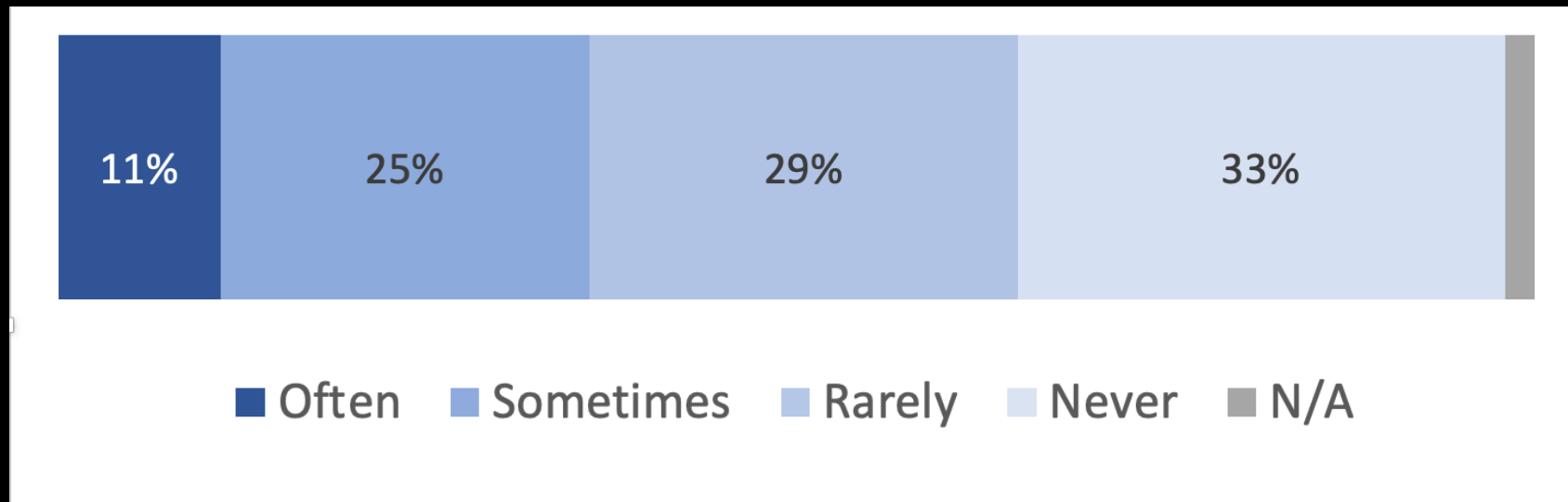
- 27% are Believers
- 29% are Sympathizers (believe in CC but not sure why it's happening)
- 39% are Skeptics

Much more likely to attribute the severity of recent natural disasters to the biblical "end times" (77%) than to climate change (49%).

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PERCENT OF AMERICANS THAT ATTEND RELIGIOUS SERVICES AT LEAST ONCE A MONTH WHO SAY THEIR CLERGY LEADER TALKS ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE...



Americans who say their clergy leader speaks at least occasionally about climate change are more likely to be climate change Believers than Americans who tend not to hear about climate change in church (49% and 36%, respectively).

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US evangelicaldom remains almost entirely unmoved by the theology of "stewardship" despite decades of effort. The evangelical mainstream is highly suspicious of anything smacking of environmentalism as a Trojan horse for paganism, New Age mysticism, and socialism. It wasn't hard for climate skeptics to win them over, and climate change has now joined COVID, guns, taxes, etc on the list of tribal issues that American white evangelicals know the party line on.

For churches in developing countries, there's much less of a tendency to deny climate change as a problem -- many churches in Malawi, Kenya, Philippines, etc. are acutely aware of its impacts. But for many of them, it's one of the more abstruse and intractable-seeming factors in the poverty landscape. Churches in Nepal, despite many foreign-facilitated discussions on climate change, by and large focus their activism on other poverty issues.

As more attributable impacts of climate change become clear, the "**stewardship**" argument is I think giving way to the "**love your neighbor**" argument. I don't think there's anything wrong with stewardship/creation care as a concept, but it has not motivated many people who weren't already convinced of the badness of climate change -- any more than e.g. the sacredness of rivers and trees in Nepali Hinduism has prevented environmental degradation here. Climate change visibly causing human suffering has a better shot at shifting more religious groups into activism mode. If we can get more Malawian Christians talking in the West -- maybe even to US evangelicals? -- there might be a wider awakening on this.

—DIRECTOR OF A CHRISTIAN DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATION, NEPAL

KOEHRSEN 2021

MUSLIMS AND CLIMATE CHANGE

“The analysis shows that there is no uniform interpretation of climate change among Muslims. Based on their interpretations of Islam, Muslims have generated different approaches to climate change. A small section of Muslim environmentalists engages in public campaigning to raise greater concern about climate change, seeks to reduce carbon emissions through sociotechnological transition efforts, and disseminates proenvironmental interpretations of Islam. However, it remains unclear to what extent these activities generate broader changes in the daily activities of Muslim communities and organizations.”

PRIORTIZATION OF ENVIRONMENT/CLIMATE AMONG MUSLIMS

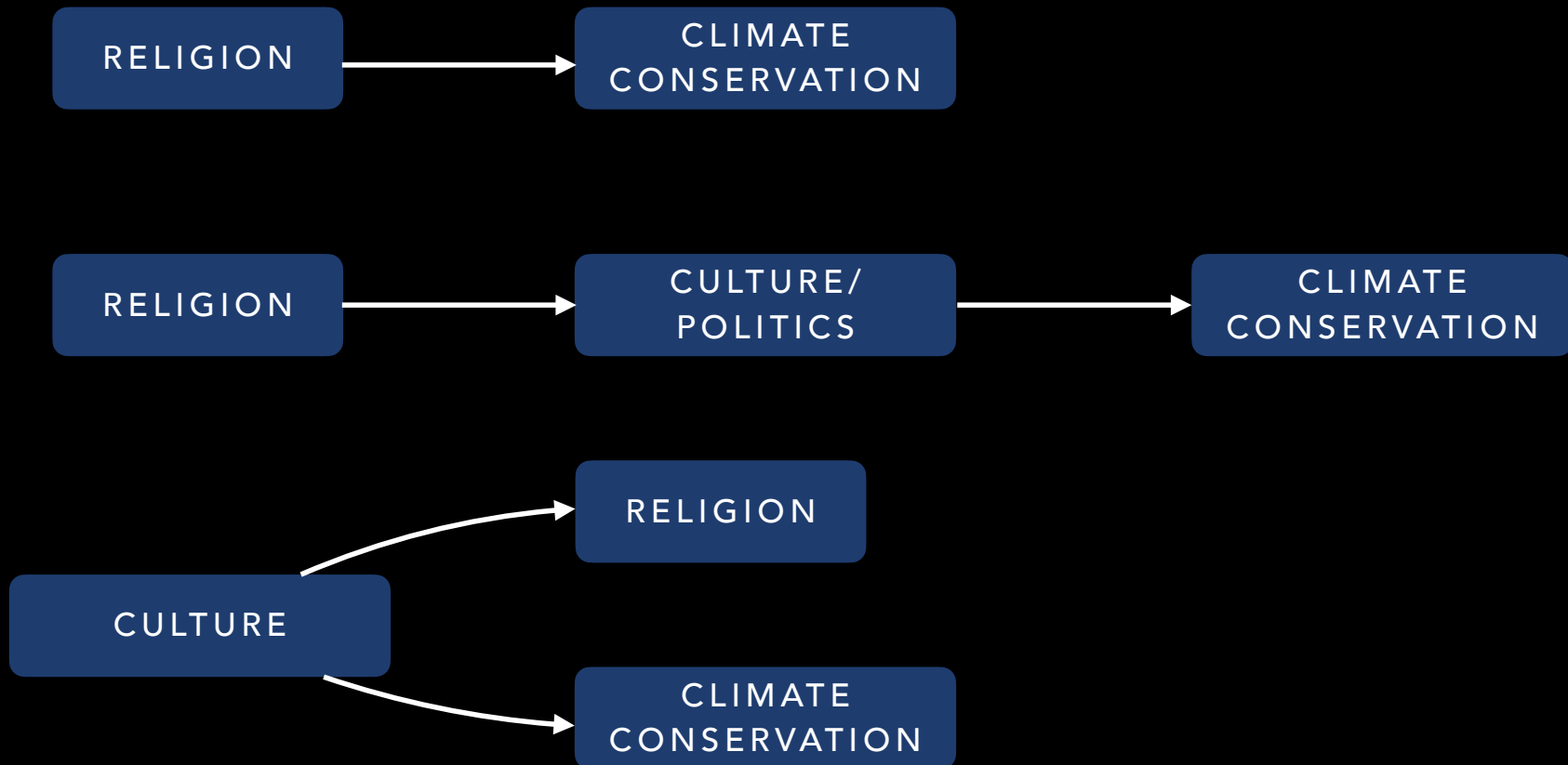
“Considering five global problems suggested in the World Value Survey, only 8% of Muslim respondents selected “environmental pollution” as the most important problem, while the majority opted for “people living in poverty and need.” At the same time, the percentage of Muslims opting for the environment varies in different countries. While less than 1% of the Muslim interviewees living in Nigeria and Pakistan regarded environmental pollution as the most pressing problem, this number rises to 22% for Muslim respondents in Uzbekistan, 17% in Russia, and 16% in India. Moreover, comparing different types of environmental pollution, Muslim interviewees tend to attribute higher importance to the pollution of rivers, lakes, and oceans than to global warming. Only in Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, and Jordan did Muslims prioritize global warming over other environmental challenges.”

— Koerhsen 2021

Three basic narratives about climate similar to those seen among Christians are present among Muslims:

- skepticism about the existence of climate change
- caused by humanity (may be linked to Western capitalism and overconsumption)
- God's will/punishment/end times

DIFFERENT MODELS OF CAUSALITY



CLOSING THOUGHTS

- Religion tends to be a complex set of ideas; it offers multiple narratives that can be exploited
- Conceptual dissonance: religious belief is immediate, personal, relational; climate change is big, remote, scientific
- Religion seems to connect more easily to local conservation with indirect connections to climate (e.g. personal consumption, reforestation, water conservation) than to what climate scholars often focus on (e.g. energy systems transition)
 - Religion may be better at adaptation activism than mitigation activism?
- Committed religious leaders and bottom-up community relationship arguments may have more leverage than abstract top-down stewardship arguments (Pope vs. local church)
- Contestation over whether environmentalism/climate conservation is internal & aligned with religious tradition or external & dangerous to religious tradition (tension between power and universality)